

SHORT TIME, HARD TIME: ACCOUNTS OF SHORT-TERM IMPRISONMENT

James A. Holstein and Richard S. Jones

ABSTRACT

This paper presents inmates' descriptions of their prison experience and offers alternate ways of analyzing these accounts. The study focuses on short-term male inmates in a maximum security prison. The authors discuss a variety of ways in which these inmates portray their incarceration and note that short time inmates ironically suggest that the pains of short-term imprisonment are especially prevalent, acute, and persistent. The alternate analyses offer different perspectives on how to construe these depictions of short time as "hard time."

"The pains of imprisonment" (Sykes 1958) have become a focal point for considerable research as both the scholarly and criminal justice communities have sought deeper understandings of the prison experience (see Johnson and

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Toch 1988). Whereas much of the interest in penal policy and institutions focuses on prisons' rehabilitative and punitive functions, Sykes' classic characterization provides a foundation for a growing concern regarding inmates' experiential orientation to the stresses, discomforts and deprivations of incarceration. Much of the research in this vein derives from inmates' descriptions of prison life. Its aim is to elicit accurate and reliable reports about prison reality that reveal a social world that is all but impenetrable to outsiders. Inmates' accounts thus provide a rich and frequently exploited source of data for corrections research.

This study examines a variety of inmate accounts concerning the short-term prison experience. Relatively little is known of the distinctive features of short-term incarceration (Schmid and Jones 1990), so our study attempts to open up a relatively unexplored area of inquiry. The data we consider reveal that inmates serving relatively short sentences (two years or less) routinely contend—often ironically—that the “pains of imprisonment” are more prevalent, acute, and persistent for short-time inmates than for those enduring longer sentences. They suggest that many, if not most, of the hardships of incarceration characterize the short-term experience, and these difficulties are compounded by several problems or complications unique to the short-term experience. In effect, short-term inmates say that “short time” is “hard time” to endure. This paper examines these descriptions of short-term incarceration, and suggests alternate ways of understanding and analyzing inmates' accounts of the pains of short-term imprisonment.¹

THE STUDY

Data for the study were collected during ten months of participant observation in a maximum security prison for men in the upper midwest of the United States. One of the authors was an inmate serving a one year felony sentence. He recorded extensive field notes describing his everyday interactions with other members of the prison community (both long- and short-term inmates), as well as his observations of the entire realm of prison life to which he was exposed. He also kept a personal “journal” of his own reflections on, and reactions to, his incarceration. Finally, extensive interviews were later conducted with 20 inmates serving sentences of two years or less. The inmates were asked a series of questions to focus their discussions of prison life, but were allowed to portray their experiences without the constraints of a formal interview schedule. This paper analyzes over 1000 pages of data from these three sources, concentrating on descriptions that inmates provided of their short-term prison experiences.

In the following sections, we organize and report inmates' depictions of their lives in prison, focusing on the features of their accounts that distinguish short-

term from long-term incarceration. We will then present alternate ways of interpreting the inmates' descriptions. These concluding sections will discuss differing ways of analyzing inmates' discourse, and will consider the implications of the different approaches for how we might frame discussions of inmates' accounts.

THE PAINS OF SHORT-TERM IMPRISONMENT

I've been here 2 months now. . . . I've gone through quite a bit in that time. The initial shock of coming here, the assaults and murder, just learning my way around. . . . Then there was my meeting with the parole board. It has definitely been an experience I shall never forget.

Short-term inmates like the one quoted here often claim their experience is fraught with difficulties. The associated "pains of imprisonment" (Sykes 1958) are typically justified as part of the price that must be paid by convicted offenders. They are framed as essential to the "punishment" that is intended to deter crime, as well as part of the "therapeutic" program that prison rehabilitation represents. Central to the logic of imprisonment and sentencing is the notion that serious crimes and criminals deserve and require more severe punishments and more extensive rehabilitation than lesser offenders. This argument then justifies assigning longer sentences to serious convicts and "short time" to lesser offenders. It assumes, however, that length of sentence is the crucial factor, and that time served is experienced in roughly the same fashion regardless of sentence length.

Of course the prison literature acknowledges that the initial shock of incarceration is particularly stressful and painful (Gibbs 1988), and it notes that inmates serving long sentences—especially life terms—confront a distinctive set of problems associated with long-term confinement (Flanagan 1988). The experience of inmates serving short sentences, however, has been tacitly assumed to be relatively mild and of no particular distinction. Sykes' (1958, p. 63) classic prison study does acknowledge diversity in inmates' perspectives on their prison experience, but he nevertheless argues that "the consensus expressed by the members of the captive population" was that the pains of imprisonment derive from frustrations all prisoners share. He categorizes prison's painful conditions in terms of deprivations; inmates, he argues, are profoundly hurt by the deprivation of liberty, goods and services, heterosexual relationships, autonomy, and security that imprisonment enforces. Johnson and Toch (1988) examine these pains in depth, but minimally differentiate the diverse experiences and orientations characteristic of inmates in maximum security prisons.

The short-term inmates we studied, however, claim that there are several uniquely troublesome aspects of doing short time. They also distinguish the short-

term experience by reference to their fluctuating interpretive orientations to prison life (Schmid and Jones 1990). Short-term inmates indicate that their orientation is shaped by their temporal and cognitive proximity to the outside world; they say they initially approach and interpret their prison experience with an "outsider's" interpretive perspective on prison life. Gradually, inmates suggest, the orientation shifts to that of an "insider" focussed on life-in-prison. Soon, as release nears, the orientation once again shifts outward, this time to an insider's perspective on the possibilities for life beyond prison. While long-term prisoners indicate a similar experience, short-timers' accounts suggest that the short time span in which the fluctuation occurs is crucial. Short-timers say their life is one of constant, jarring change.

Short-term inmates suggest several related ways in which their incarceration is especially onerous and problematic. First, short-timers say they bring anticipations, expectations, and fears into prison that shape their perceptions of, and adaptations to, prison life. Consequently, they experience prison as an especially dangerous, unpredictable environment. While this may be true for anyone entering prison, (especially first-timers), short-timers say it is especially difficult for them because they have little time to adjust to their circumstances before those circumstances begin to change. In addition, short-term inmates claim they are more likely to retain their orientation to persons in the outside world as significant others. Their short sentences make it possible to think about persons on the outside and life after prison—something usually avoided by inmates serving longer sentences. Nonetheless, this often torments them.

Second, short-term inmates depict their experience in terms of unfamiliarity and uncertainty. They indicate that they are constantly in the process of being socialized to new settings—"learning the ropes," scouting the terrain, developing the new knowledge necessary to survive in the prison environment. Short-term inmates say they spend most of their incarceration moving into and out of new and unfamiliar circumstances, hence they are constantly in the process of *becoming* competent convicts. They spend relatively little of their prison time exercising (and reaping the benefits of) the competencies they have cultivated.

In a closely related third way, short-term inmates portray their experience as perpetually unsettled. They claim that while they constantly struggle to develop adequate anticipations of, and responses to, the contingencies of prison life, they also have to adapt to a series of changing surroundings and circumstances that are more or less problematic. The life of a short-timer is thus described as disjointed; he is a relative transient within the prison. Consequently, stability is portrayed as fleeting, and life is characterized as a constant series of adjustments.

Finally, inmates suggest that because short-term convicts are never far from the ends of their sentences, their adaptations to prison life are constrained by their focus on life *after* prison. This perspective heightens their sensitivity to the passage of time and focuses their efforts on "completing" rather than "enduring" their sentences. According to inmates, the desire to finish one's sentence without

incidents that might result in longer sentences deprives short-term inmates of many adaptation strategies that make prison life more manageable and bearable.

Short-term inmates say these factors exacerbate the frustrations Sykes enumerates. Indeed, they suggest some additional deprivations—for example, lack of working knowledge, predictability, and control—that distinguish short-term imprisonment. In the following sections, we present and elaborate inmates' accounts of the distinctive features of short-term incarceration. The accounts represent inmates' "quasi-theories" (Hewitt and Hall 1973) about their prison experience, and display the "pains" of doing short time. At this point, we do not wish to challenge inmates' descriptions, or subject them to the evaluation criteria of conventional social research. Rather, we will first report what the inmates reported. We then conclude the paper with a discussion of alternate ways of analyzing these accounts.

PAINS FROM AN OUTSIDE ORIENTATION

According to their own accounts, short-term inmates are very much oriented to, and by, the outside world, both as they begin, and as they endure, their prison sentences. First, they import anticipations, expectations, and fears promoted on the outside that shape their interpretations of, and responses to, prison life. This leads them to treat prison as an especially dangerous, unpredictable, and problematic environment. Second, and almost equally importantly, they maintain their outside orientation so that they are, and remain, concerned about what is going on in their outside life spheres while they are imprisoned. Short-term inmates claim that they can be deeply troubled by what members of the outside world think about them. Moreover, they report that considerable pain derives from their inability to affect what is going on outside prison; they feel a profound helplessness regarding their outside worlds and lives.

Imported Fears and Apprehensions

Short-term inmates suggest that in the absence of a "stock of knowledge" (Schutz 1970) accumulated during extended residence in prison, they are forced to rely on "imported" knowledge. Thus, they report gleaning their predominant images of prison from commonplace outside sources: television, movies, fictional or journalistic accounts, and from persons who have been in prison (Schmid and Jones 1990). Indeed, the following interview extract suggests that some new inmates know little more about prison than the typical mass media consumer.

All I knew was what I'd seen on T.V. or in the movies, you know, with George Raft and those kind of guys. . . . there's been T.V. programs on how violent

it was. You hear about Attica and down in the Southwest, so I was scared. I was extremely scared. I don't think I'd been that scared before.

This inmate simultaneously reports the source, content, and consequences of his prison image. He suggests that this outside imagery is the source of profound fear, a prevalent theme in inmates' accounts, as the following interview excerpt illustrates:

I was scared to come here because I thought that it was going to be rougher than it really is. I figured that people would be bothering you . . . probably playing games, doing stuff on you. Probably something like you see on T.V. on the documentaries, like Statesville. . . . I was just really scared . . . I thought I was going to get beat up or raped.

The impression these accounts cultivate is one of an inmate who is very apprehensive and uncertain about the environment he is entering. Such accounts often accompany short-term inmates' explanations of their prison adaptation strategies. They claim the imported image of prison led them to be extremely vigilant and isolated, keeping to themselves and not interacting with others, thus giving the impression that they were tough, hard, and above all, not scared. Regardless of the interpretive context in which they were offered, the depictions of imported prison images convey an overwhelming and justified sense of fear and apprehension.

Short-term inmates report that it is difficult to move beyond these anticipatory images. They do not know what to expect from either the prison staff or their fellow convicts. Initial attempts to overcome imported apprehensions are often frustrated by both lack of prison experience and lack of cooperation by knowledgeable informants—that is, prison staff and inmates. For example, one inmate noted that information given him by county jail inmates was “a bunch of lies . . . just things to scare you.” Another indicated that there were so many versions of what prison was like—those of the various staff members and inmates—that his attempts to construct a working knowledge of the environment were continually thwarted, even by the prison orientation program:

There was a lot of differences from what I heard [from inmates]. Everybody comes up to you and tells you something different. The person in education told us something different. We come back, the guards tell us something different when we ask them. You ask the inmates, they'll tell you something different. The only way to find out is to lay back and wait 'til it happens, then you find out.

Inmate accounts, then, depict short-term incarceration as dominated by fears and apprehensions inspired by hard-to-supplant imported images. While this

description fits inexperienced inmates generally, short-timers claim it is particularly characteristic of their circumstances because large proportions of their sentences are interpretively organized by imported knowledge and expectations. Inmate accounts suggest that as convicts live out their sentences, their image of the prison begins to derive more from "experience" than outside "hearsay" (Schmid and Jones 1990). The unique pain of doing short-time, say inmates, lies in the extent to which the outside-inspired anxieties dominate the short-term experience; short time precludes the acquisition of a less threatening, more "realistic" image.

Concerns Regarding the Outside World

Short-term inmates describe a second set of concerns emanating from their orientation to the outside world. They often worry about what significant others outside prison are doing and thinking. Frequently, they express anxiety about whether persons on the outside will "forget" about them. As one inmate put it, "One of the big concerns of many of the inmates is whether or not you have people out there who care for you." The following inmate description suggests the pain that accompanies thoughts about the outside:

A group of us were talking about our ladies on the outside. . . . We all seem to wonder about them, what they are doing, why they haven't been writing or visiting? . . . I think most guys would be better off if they had just broken off with their ladies prior to coming in, then they would have one less thing to worry about.

Despite such recommendations, short-term inmates indicate that they continue to care about life on the outside. This, they suggest, is unavoidable simply because their sentences are relatively short.

Inmates indicate that because short-timers have recently arrived, and because they will soon depart, they are attached to the outside world in a way that long-term convicts are not. While long-term inmates indicate that they avoid thinking about outsiders, short-timers say this is difficult because the outside world is so temporally close. This proximity denies them an adaptation to prison life—disregarding the outside world—that many of their fellow inmates rely upon to help them "do their time."

Inmate accounts, then, suggest that short-term inmates' orientations to the outside world—both cognitively and behaviorally—have painful consequences. The short-timer's "inside-out" focus interpretively transforms one's relatively short sentence into "hard time." According to inmates, not only does this make incarceration difficult in terms of the frustrations of not being able to participate in, let alone control, life outside the prison, but it also heightens anxiety about what life will be like *after* prison. Thus, short-term inmates

suggest that their temporal proximity to the outside world—a defining characteristic of “short time”—contributes to their pervasive feelings of fear, apprehension, and helplessness.

ACCOUNTS OF PRISON UNCERTAINTY

Short-term inmates frequently speak of the difficulties of adjusting to incarceration. Their descriptions are reminiscent of Gibbs' (1988) report of the initial shock of jail detention, and their accounts appear similar to those of other inmates beginning longer sentences. Whereas reports of unfamiliarity with a new environment are characteristic of all new inmates, short-timers often describe the distinctive sense in which their short sentences provide for a relatively problematic confinement. Compared to long-term imprisonment, short-term incarceration is a relatively unstable, anxiety-provoking experience.

According to short-term inmates, their consuming task is learning how to survive in prison during the short time they will be there. Experience is portrayed as the only teacher. The particular hardship posed for short-term inmates resides partly in their sense that they are “constantly learning the ropes”—that is being socialized, and adjusting, to prison life. Inmates indicate that they receive much conflicting information and many countervailing instructions on how to conduct themselves. Only experience in the prison environment, they say, can teach an inmate how to effectively do his time. Just when short-term inmates begin to master the unfamiliar and uncertain parameters of prison life and begin to successfully adjust to new circumstances—just when they begin to “get a grip on things”—inmates report that their prison careers are likely to move to a new phase where they will be relocated, and where the whole process must begin again. Short-timers' accounts of their prison careers depict a series of moves and short lay-overs in a variety of “alien” territories. They chronicle their incarceration much like temporary visitors; their accounts reflect far less of the sense of “membership”—being a competent “native”—than do accounts of long-term incarceration in which inmate adaptations to prison life resemble total socialization to the prison world (i.e., prisonization, in Clemmer's [1940] terms). Uncertainty thus characterizes the short-term experience.

This is apparent in several ways. At the prison studied, felons are sentenced prior to incarceration, but their actual time served is determined when they meet with the parole board sometime after admission. The process of determining the actual length of imprisonment begins when the inmate meets with his “caseworker” who presents the case to the parole board. Short-term inmates' relationships with their caseworkers are typically described as problematic as in the following journal entry:

When you first arrive, you are assigned a caseworker and told that he will be around to see you. What you don't know is that you can wait anywhere from a week to two months to see him. . . . He's going to tell you what to expect from the parole board, but you never really know for sure. You are left hanging. . . . Inmates' relationships with their caseworkers are usually poor. You don't know what to expect from them or whose side they are on. . . . They are supposed to be helping you but they are paid by "the man."

First, it is noteworthy that this inmate indicates that a substantial portion of a short prison term may be spent waiting in "limbo" for a meeting with the caseworker just to *initiate* the process of meeting with the parole board; a large portion of a short-term sentence may be spent not knowing how long the sentence will actually be. Such an experience is described by inmates as *de facto* indeterminate sentencing, a source of considerable anxiety. A second uncertainty lies in not knowing or trusting caseworkers. Inmates depict caseworkers as untrustworthy; they repeatedly question their motives and loyalties, and state that they are constantly uncertain about what to expect from caseworkers, or from anyone with whom they are involved. Inmates say that this is hard on short-timers because they have relatively more consequential business to transact with caseworkers.

While waiting and preparing for the parole board is characterized as an arduous experience fraught with uncertainty, the outcome of the hearing appears even more consequential:

I found out that I meet with the Board at 10:00 AM on Thursday. I am pretty nervous about the whole thing. . . . To most of the people in here, it is pretty insignificant whether I do 9 or 10 months, but to me a month is a month. Let me tell you, a month can seem like a lifetime. . . . I'll just be glad when it's [the hearing] over.

Even a small difference in sentence length is cast as significant in light of inmates' subjective perceptions. This account also suggests how a relatively small amount of time can seem more important to a short term inmate because it represents a relatively large proportion of the short sentence.

Finally, short-term inmates express a disconcerting ambivalence regarding the meaning of their short sentence within the prison community. Short-timers occasionally admit to a sort of embarrassment because they are not "experienced cons." With their focus on maintaining outside ties and their sights set on the relatively close date of the end of their sentence, short-term inmates are reluctant to become fully involved in, or committed to, the prison social world. Many vow to stay out of trouble, remain apart from the *sub rosa* prison culture, and concentrate on preparing for life after prison. But this strategy, inmates suggest, prevents them from becoming fully integrated

members of the prison culture. They are less adept actors in prison life, and are granted less respect by their prison colleagues. Indeed, inmates indicate that "a longer sentence carries more status. . . . Someone sentenced to a 10 year hitch has more status in their [inmates'] eyes than someone on a one year hitch." Short-term inmates thus stand in an uneasy relationship with their own adaptation strategies and their status in the prison community by virtue of their short sentences.

Uncertainty, then, is a routine feature of descriptions of short-term incarceration. Inmates say they have little time to gain a working knowledge of their situations, and must deal with changing circumstances that are at least initially problematic. They indicate that uncertainties about length of sentence, new associates, prison jobs, cell block assignments, movement from maximum to minimum security, final parole, and other situations are hardships associated with serving short time.

SHORT-TERM IMPRISONMENT AS CONSTANT ADJUSTMENT

"Just when you get a grip on things and start to feel somewhat comfortable, something happens to upset things." This short-term inmate's lament conveys the commonly-voiced sentiment that short-term convicts are forced to continually adjust to changing prison circumstances despite their relatively short stay. Inmates' characterize these changes as unsettling because they disturb the hard-earned comforts that inmates associate with a more or less stable living situation where everyday occurrences are anticapatable and manageable.

Short-term inmates often describe their experience as a series of unsettling moves from one status and location to another. These moves disrupt inmates' daily lives and require significant adjustments. They are particularly difficult in light of short-term inmates' sense that prison is a dangerous and problematic environment. Unfamiliar terrain, they contend, is approached apprehensively. For example, in the prison studied, short-term inmates are housed in a "Receiving and Orientation" (R&O) unit at the beginning of their sentences. Initially, their activity and movement is closely confined. This means no free movement or privileges except for one hour of telephone use per day. The rest of the day is spent in their cells or in orientation classes, medical and psychological evaluations, and other intake operations. Inmates eat in their cells, not even venturing to the dining hall. While inmates voice some dissatisfaction with this arrangement, they are apprehensive when they are finally allowed to mingle with the main prison population. They note the contrast between the cloistered R&O environment and the more complex, threatening circumstances of the regular residence units, which inmates often describerized as "small cities" or "ghettos" populated with "murderers," "violent criminals," and "rapos."

Inmates report that they adjust relatively quickly to life in R&O. While the unit's drawbacks (e.g., restricted movement, no privileges, and so on) are frequently noted, short-term inmates nonetheless express disappointment, uneasiness, and even trepidation as they and their associates begin to move into the regular prison population. They may note the first significant disruption in their prison lives when friends and associates are transferred from R&O to another residential unit, as the following inmate remarks:

Shit, I am getting lonesome in R and O. All the guys I hung around with since I got here have moved to "B" hall, and it seems like the new guys that are coming in are jerks.

Inmates suggest that the relocation of trusted associates is, at minimum, unsettling. In other instances it is described as traumatic, as social bonds that inmates rely upon for support and security are indiscriminately severed, as in the following account of the separation of close friends or "partners":

Bummer. My number one partner moved to "B" hall today. . . . Hell, everyone is over there now. . . . It will be boring over here for a while. . . . We had spent almost all our time together—going to meals, watching T.V., playing backgammon, walking to work—and then suddenly we hardly ever see each other. . . . There seems to be an emptiness with him gone. I sure do miss him; he was a good dude to talk to.

When inmates, themselves, are moved, they relate other aspects of disruption. The following journal notation summarizes reactions to the move from R&O into a regular cell block.

. . . there is some apprehension. Like anywhere else, it's a new move. . . . It's just a lot of hassle. . . . for most of the guys, all their friends are in R and O, so they might be hesitant to move for that reason, plus you would have to meet a bunch of new neighbors. Actually, there is probably some fear. All the lifers are in "B" hall. . . . As one guy says, "I don't really want to move, you know what I mean? I'm all settled here." It is hard to move from familiar ground to foreign territory.

In addition to expressing fear and apprehension, inmates describe another sense of loss associated with the move out of R&O. Many explain that they have become comfortable in R&O. They know what to expect from the guards and from the other inmates. They also claim they are achieving "senior status" and have begun to accrue the benefits accorded "oldtimers" or "veterans." Inmates thus report that they don't want to leave R&O because they feel that as "senior men" they "have the run of the place" and will lose their privileges if they move. Many figure that as "rookies" in a new cell block, it will take

them considerable time to reacquire those privileges, and they will probably be moved again before that happens. As "the new kid in town," and with a large number of inmates doing fairly long sentences, they might never acquire senior status and privilege.

Short-term inmates change residence units and living environments relatively frequently. They may move from intake, to R&O, to any of several cell blocks, to a variety of minimum security arrangements, and finally to pre-release, all within the span of a few months. Inmates say this is disruptive and requires constant adaptation to new and problematic surroundings. These accounts suggest the felt, but often overlooked, costs to moving an inmate from one setting to another. Short-term inmates say their security is threatened, their "life styles" are disrupted, and their "seniority" is cancelled by the relative frequency of transfers that characterize short-term incarceration. While long-time convicts may have their lives disrupted occasionally, short-term inmates suggest that this is a relatively frequent and particularly salient feature of their own prison experience. Thus, short-time is depicted as disrupted time, which, according to inmates, heightens the pain of short-term imprisonment.

RETURN TO AN OUTSIDE ORIENTATION

The outside orientation that characterizes short-term inmates' prison experience may fade somewhat as they serve their sentence. Still, because the end of their sentence is always relatively near, short-term inmates tend to talk about time and their anticipated freedom more than others. Some inmates say this is a problem.

I was talking to [a lifer] and he told me that he doesn't usually hang around short-timers because they are so preoccupied with time. He said it took him a long time to get over counting the days, weeks, and months, and that he really doesn't like to be reminded about it.

While a short sentence may seem objectively less severe than a long one, short-term inmates nonetheless describe one particularly onerous aspect of doing short time—the constant struggle against letting thoughts of freedom dominate their days and make time pass more slowly. They report that the repeated transfers and changes in status that characterize short-term sentences reinforce the salience of time. For example, at the prison studied, a bridging step between maximum security and release is the minimum security "farm" where some inmates may be moved as the end of their sentence approaches. For some, this may happen just a few weeks after their parole board hearing establishes the actual length of their sentences. But the move to the "farm," while generally viewed positively, is also described in terms of the difficulties it poses with regard to preoccupation with time.

The wait for the farm is not all that easy. As hard as I try not to think about it, the more it stays on my mind. . . . It is very difficult to keep the farm off my mind. I figure if I don't think about it, it won't be as agonizing waiting for it to happen. It would be so much easier if they would give us a date to go, but they don't."

Once on the "farm," the preoccupation with time does not abate. Indeed, it seems progressively more consuming as the end of sentence approaches. In the following journal entry, note the ironic ways in which "short time" spent on the "farm" is portrayed as particularly hard to endure.

One problem with the time out here is the constant reminder [about time]. On the inside, once you've reached the parole board, you don't even want to think about time. Out here, your release date is posted on the bulletin board, every week you always see people leaving. People are constantly talking about how many days until they get out.

The outside, end-of-sentence orientation apparently does more than simply focus short-term inmates on the passage of time. Inmates suggest that the proximity of freedom constrains their adaptations to everyday life in prison. For example, men doing short time are often described as being so concerned about their always-impending release that they limit their strategies for coping with prison life to only those behaviors that will not threaten their parole. Inmates argue that because short-timers "always have parole on their minds," they try to avoid trouble at almost any cost, thus constraining the ways they pass time (e.g., they may refrain from drug use or gambling) and restricting how they deal with other inmates. For example, short-timers are said to be unlikely candidates to resort to violence or even to defend themselves physically, and are thus more likely to become victims of others' abuse or exploitation.

This stands in stark contrast to descriptions of the long-term convict who has "freedoms" that are unavailable to short-timers because he is willing to disregard prison rules and sanctions. Long-term inmates are portrayed as being more likely to use violence in their own defense, or to exploit short-timers because they recognize short-timers' unwillingness to act in ways that would jeopardize parole. Consider the following description:

[Lifers] have no cares in the world. It makes no difference to them if they commit another crime, because they don't even think about ever getting out of this place. Their one concern is themselves, and that no one fuck with them.

The irony here lies in the "disabling" character of the short sentence. In a sense, the short-term inmate's ability to adapt to prison life—and protect

himself from victimization—are limited, say inmates, by the “leniency” of his sentences.

Some inmates indicate that the outside orientation and the heightened anticipation of soon-to-be-granted freedom may eventually be taken to the extreme. This seems to be the case in the following description of an inmate’s adaptation to the final weeks of his sentence:

I continue to live in self imposed exile in my little cubicle. Of course I do come out to go to work, for meals, and to bullshit with [a fellow inmate]. . . . I feel it is better for me here. This way I can’t get into trouble. I guess now that I am nearing the end of my sentence, I should be thinking cautious. No sense fucking up now.

Inmates say the orientation to the outside world can be so powerful that many of the everyday activities that make prison life bearable are abandoned because they pose some threat—however minor—to completing one’s sentence without incident. While this, and other, consequences of an outside orientation apply to all inmates as they near the completion of their sentences, short-termers’ accounts imply that the outside orientation dominates most of their prison experience, and in a sense, deprives them of some important and seemingly effective strategies for dealing with the pains, uncertainties, and threats of prison life.

ANALYZING INMATE ACCOUNTS AS REPORTS OF PRISON REALITY

Typically, the social sciences—including sociology, criminology, and related disciplines concerned with crime and corrections—treat talk and language as a means of expressing an underlying, shared cognitive order. This implies a correspondence theory of meaning in which words and meaning are distinct and separable from one another. The meaning of a word is what it references, corresponds to, or stands for in the “real world.” Talk and written language are considered exclusively in terms of their representative function; their essential task is description, and they can perform this function because interactants agree in advance what the words stand for or mean (Heritage 1984). From this perspective, the data considered here—short-term inmates’ spoken and written descriptions of their prison experiences—may be analyzed as more or less accurate *reports* or *representations* (literally, re-presentations) of the reality of prison life.

If we treat these accounts as more or less literal descriptions, we might argue that our study gives us special insight into what it is actually like to be a short-term inmate—if our study measures up to rigorous methodological standards.

In theory, it would be possible to capture the facts and meanings of that experience because inmates could communicate them by way of their spoken and written words—their accounts. Our methodological concerns would focus on possible bias-inducing aspects of the procedures used to elicit these accounts so that we might determine the extent to which the actual facts of the inmate experience had been misrepresented or contaminated and the extent to which the accounts actually represent the inmate population to which we ultimately refer. Ideally, we would seek unbiased accounts from as many sources as possible, then scrutinize them to filter out unreliable statements. The patterns and characterizations that emerge from the collection of reliable accounts might then be treated as reasonably literal descriptions of what was “really” happening (Becker 1958).

Admittedly, by the standards of a rigorous, orthodox social science, the data presented here are imperfect. The sample is small and perhaps only minimally representative. The accounts are predominantly by short-term inmates, so we have no direct way of knowing if their comparisons of short-term and long-term imprisonment are valid. Our interviewing procedures directed informants to predetermined topics so that informants' social worlds were only partially reported and reproduced. The inmate journals and field notes were systematically recorded, but, being a practical enterprise competing with other practical matters in the course of inmate life, they fell short of capturing the entirety of the inmate experience. Nevertheless, we can argue that these data represent a useful (perhaps the best available) picture of the lives of short-term inmates. Indeed, these accounts might be considered especially authentic because they are produced by actual inmates who have lived the experiences about which they have spoken or written.

If we accept the validity of our data as approximately literal representations of the typical short-term inmate experience, we can formulate the implications of the stories we have been told. The accounts indicate that short-term inmates experience most, if not all, of the typical pains of imprisonment Sykes (1958) and others have noted, but, in addition, they experience several noteworthy hardships that are peculiar to their short-term status. Short sentences appear to compress most of the onerous experiences of incarceration into a short time span. Thus, while short sentences do expropriate less of an inmate's time, they do not inflict proportionately less deprivation, pain, or punishment.

The corrections literature suggests that prisoners adjust to their environment and circumstances through conscious adaptation strategies and intensive socialization (Clemmer 1940; Irwin 1970; Wheeler 1961). Short-term inmates appear to benefit minimally from many of these processes. They portray themselves as outsiders or newcomers in a frightening, stress-filled environment *for the duration of their incarceration*; they never attain the status and relative comfort of being “experienced cons.” They are captives of an “outside” orientation and suffer grave apprehensions and fears imported from outside

the prison that they never fully overcome through familiarity with prison reality. Short-term inmates retain an orientation to persons in the outside world so that their perceived losses due to enforced separation are greater than the long-term counterparts, who completely shut themselves off from thoughts of the outside world and its inhabitants.

In addition, we might conclude that short-term inmates never fully overcome the uncertainty of the prison environment. They are moved about relatively frequently so they never become fully comfortable with their living circumstances, nor conversant with the local cultures. They never acquire seniority in the inmate social order which is the basis among inmates (and also among prison personnel) for special status and privilege. Finally, short-term inmates are always closer to the ends of their sentences so they have more to lose by breaking prison rules than do long-term convicts. Consequently, short-timers are deprived of a range of responses many of their colleagues use to manage prison life—*sub rosa* economic and cultural practices, illicit forms of recreation, and coercive means of dealing with and controlling other inmates, for example.

This analysis could be used to elaborate and extend other classic studies of prison life. Clemmer (1940), for example, notes that prisoners adjusted to incarceration by assimilating a "prison culture." It is through "prisonization," he argues, that inmates adapt to their confinement and learn to live like prisoners (for better or worse). Sykes (1958) suggests a similar thesis; prisoners insulate themselves from the pains of imprisonment and adapt to their incarceration by internalizing the roles of an inmate social system. Both authors suggest that inmates *learn* how to survive the prison experience and internalize aspects of the prison culture as adaptation strategies. We might argue that short-term inmates experience all of the difficulties of "learning the ropes" of prison life, but do not have the opportunity to fully internalize or practice behaviors that are functional to prison survival. In a sense, short-term inmates serve their sentences as "novices" in a world of hardened convicts. They never feel that their social world is under their control. In addition, short-term inmates' outside orientation precludes their internalization of prison culture and roles, so that they are at a day-to-day "disadvantage" when confronted by convicts fully committed to the prison culture and way of life (i.e., fully "prisonized" inmates). Taken all together, the inmate accounts we have examined suggest that the short-term inmate's social world never comes fully under his "field of domination" (Schutz 1964) where he comes to know "instinctively" what to expect and what to do in the course of his everyday prison life.

Of course we should not ignore alternate accounts that acknowledge the ways that short prison sentences are less severe than long ones, nor the accounts that present the prison experience as routine and excruciatingly boring (Schmid and Jones 1990). Nevertheless, the accounts we present in this paper provide the commonsense basis for arguing that short-term incarceration is replete

with the "pains of imprisonment." According to the inmates themselves, short time is "hard time."

AN ETHNOMETHODOLOGICAL ALTERNATIVE

The preceding analysis treats inmate accounts as more or less accurate *reports* of prison reality. It assumes that language is a neutral conduit for description; words represent or tell *about* objective circumstances and meanings. In this section, we offer an alternate theoretical approach that treats the "objective reality of social facts" as an interactional accomplishment (Garfinkel 1967). From this ethnomethodologically informed perspective, language use is a means by which reality is organized and made sensible (Heritage 1984); it is a form of *social action* through which social actors assemble the intelligible characteristics of their own circumstances. Descriptions, accounts, or reports, then, are not merely *about* some social world as much as they are *constitutive of* that world. And because language use is situated in the circumstances it describes, discourse must be analyzed with concern for the context of its production—that is, who produced it, where and when it was produced, and what its production accomplished (Garfinkel 1967).

From this point of view, analysis of inmates' reports would focus on how such accounts are *used* to socially organize the prison experience. The analysis would consider these accounts in terms of *descriptive practice*—the context-oriented process through which the organized, observable character of actions and circumstances is locally produced and managed. Where the preceding analysis treated inmates' accounts as factual reports and tried to ascertain the "real" prison experience from them, the alternate perspective considers how those accounts organize and are organized by the empirical circumstances from which they emerged. Analysis would not be concerned with how well inmates' accounts represented an objective reality, but would instead consider how these accounts were used to reflexively accomplish a *sense* of reality; it would examine what inmates *do with words* as they make sense of their prison experience.

Analyzing inmates' language use for the ways in which it interprets and organizes prison experience would fundamentally transform the analytic project undertaken in the preceding sections of this paper. In the previous analysis, we collected inmates' descriptions of their short-term prison experiences, then inspected the collections for broad similarities or patterns in the descriptions. When we found observations that appeared regularly and from multiple sources, we cast them as accurate, reliable reports of what the short-term experience was like. From these, we offered analytic generalizations about life in prison. Our analysis, then, was largely dependent upon the inmates' formulations. In a sense, it was a systematic and generalized reiteration of the

inmates' own analyses. We do not mean to short-change our own contributions; we evaluated a multitude of diverse accounts for their appropriateness, organized the relevant and reliable statements under a framework composed of sociologically relevant concepts, and generalized particular statements to larger classes of action, circumstances or individuals. But our analysis clearly echoed and amplified the inmates' analyses of their circumstances and actions, treating inmates' discourse as an analytic *resource* and considering it merely for its reportorial functions.

From the ethnomethodological perspective, however, we would consider inmates' discourse as our *topic*—rather than as a resource for understanding some other topic (e.g., inmates' actions, circumstances, or experiences). We might, for example, analyze the data presented earlier in this paper to assemble a detailed description of how inmates' accounts instructed their recipients in how to interpret the short-term prison experience as uniquely "painful." This analysis would focus on the discourse *practices* through which short time was situationally constituted as "hard time." Consider, for example, the way the following inmate journal extract (first presented on page 297) is structured to display the painful uncertainty of short-term incarceration.

When you first arrive, you are assigned a caseworker and told that he will be around to see you. What you don't know is that you can wait anywhere from a week to two months to see him He's going to tell you what to expect from the parole board, but you never really know for sure. You are left hanging . . . Inmates' relationships with their caseworkers are usually poor. You don't know what to expect from them or whose side they are on. . . . They are supposed to be helping you but they are paid by "the man."

This excerpt artfully constructs a series of "ironies" to make apparent the "pains of short term imprisonment." Note how a routine, and ostensibly humane feature of the early days of incarceration—a visit from the prison caseworker—is reported so that the visit seems problematic—a troublesome rather than comforting experience. The extract is constructed from "contrast structures" (Smith 1978) that implicitly compare what actually happened to what was presumably promised. The account states that an inmate is told he will see a caseworker, but that the inmate isn't told that there may be indefinite delays before the meeting eventuates. Then the extract suggests that the caseworker will give advice, but that the advice cannot really be trusted. Finally, it closes with the remark that caseworkers are "supposed to be helping you," but they are nonetheless part of the prison administration, and by implication, not actually concerned with the prisoners' best interests.

Our analysis here focuses on how a painfully uncertain set of circumstances is conveyed to the recipients of the account by ironically developing discrepancies between what inmates were led to expect and what they actually

experienced. Rather than evaluating the extract for the likelihood of its accuracy, we examine the discourse itself for its reality constituting structures and practices—that is, the procedures through which the prison experience is descriptively organized. Similar practices are apparent in several of the extracts presented in earlier sections of this paper. For example, note how an inmate portrayed an apparently more severe sentence as, in at least one important respect, more desirable than a short term (from page 298): “a longer sentence carries more status. . . . Someone sentenced to a 10 year hitch has more status in their [inmates’] eyes than someone on a one year hitch.” Note once again that an irony was constructed so as to encourage the recipient of this account to understand another hardship of serving short time.

We see similar practices in explanations of short-time inmates’ reluctant use of violence (as on pages 301 and 302), and note how these accounts instruct outsiders in how to interpret short-term inmates’ relatively passive behavior when confronted with possibly violent circumstances. Consider how the following account orients others’ perceptions of short-term inmates’ submissive behavior when aggression is a plausible alternative in a violence laden environment.

A short timer always has parole on his mind. He wants to get out of prison as soon as possible and wants to avoid any trouble that may affect his release date. This restricts the way he deals with other inmates. The short timer is not as likely to resort to violence to defend himself providing he sees other alternatives . . . the short timer may be a better candidate for becoming a victim. . . . The long timer is more likely to use violence in his defense, and can also use the threat of violence against short timers.

This tells us that when short-term inmates eschew violence, their behavior would be attributed to fear of jeopardizing their parole, and not cowardice, weakness, or other possible motives. It thus instructs us in how to see the meaning of diverse prison circumstances and behaviors that could be otherwise understood. Such descriptions organize our understandings in ways that render short-term inmates’ behavior situationally plausible, sensible, and warranted—that is, accountable—to everyday standards of rationality and efficacy within the prison world. In short, the accounts convey desired aspects of short-term inmates’ identities (Scott and Lyman 1970), reflexively attributing meaning to the activities and circumstances to which they refer.

The alternate approach thus reformulates the phenomenon being studied. It abandons the quest for an objective reality of prison life, and focuses instead on inmates’ reality constructing *practices*. Other prison studies (e.g., Clemmer 1940; Irwin 1970; Sykes 1958), as well as our earlier analysis, have used inmates’ own accounts as analytic *resources* for explaining prison life; indeed, the

inmates' accounts and the authors' analyses are often identical. The ethnomethodological approach, however, cautions us against adopting members' (in this case, inmates') accounts and descriptions as our own analytical tools (Garfinkel 1967; Zimmerman and Pollner 1970). It directs us to proceed like anthropologists who, when studying distant societies, resist the use of native explanations of those cultures as scientific explanations. This stance does not disparage native explanations; rather, it recasts them as objects of inquiry—that is, phenomena to be studied in their own right. Analysis then focuses on the production of inmates' descriptions, the context of their production, and the practical purposes to which they were directed. Since most of the accounts we examined were produced for the edification of “outsiders,” we would ask “what was accomplished by these accounts?” We have already noted one answer: they instruct those outsiders to interpret short-term incarceration as a problematic, painful experience. Descriptions of “short time as hard time” thus portray short-term inmates' attitudes and behaviors—their prison adaptations—as sensible, warranted, predictable, and motivated by circumstances outside the inmates themselves. They suggest situational, rather than personal, attributions of responsibility for potentially discrediting behavior and orientations. In a sense, the alternate approach treats these descriptions as *rhetoric* rather than reports; as social action, their purpose is as much persuasive as it is representational.

The alternate perspective also suggests that previous studies of prison life be reconsidered more explicitly in terms of language use and descriptive practice. Sykes (1958) and Giallombardo (1966), for example, both focus on prison discourse in their classic discussions of “argot roles” and “fictive families,” respectively. Their data might be re-examined for the ways that inmates actually use these modes of talking about prison roles and identities to make sense of—that is, to interpret and manage—their prison experience. Prison jargon, or inmates' “fictive family” assignment practices, might therefore be analyzed as ways of socially organizing the prison experience.

A study of inmate accounts from an ethnomethodological standpoint thus aims to understand how inmates constitute their experience through language and interaction. Its topic, orienting questions, and conclusions would differ from those offered in our earlier analysis. In contrast to what we concluded in our preceding analysis (i.e., short time is hard time), from the alternate perspective, we might make the following claim: inmates' accounts of “the pains of short-term imprisonment” reveal interpretive procedures employed by short-term inmates to socially organize their prison experience. The “pains of short-term imprisonment” are situationally accomplished products of inmates' accounting practices which constitute short time as “hard time.”

NOTE

1. Throughout the paper, we refer to what inmates *said*—their accounts, reports, descriptions, and so forth. We do this intentionally to conceptually distinguish between these accounts and the experience they putatively represent. While this may occasionally make the text somewhat cumbersome, the distinction will be justified in the concluding sections of the paper.

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